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U.S. 219 Meyersdale Bypass Project

Historically, most regulatory agencies have been reluctant to invite public input on federal undertakings. The recent revisions to Section 36 CFR Part 800, however, emphasize increased public involvement throughout the regulatory process. The U.S. 219 Meyersdale Bypass Project is an example of how public involvement can lead to a successful partnership between the community, the regulatory agency, and archeological consultants.

As part of the Meyersdale project, and in keeping with the provisions of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation (PennDOT) District 9-0, in cooperation with the Federal Highway Administration, sponsored archeological investigations to determine the impact of roadway construction on cultural resources. The survey identified 68 sites, of which 21 were evaluated for their eligibility to the National Register of Historic Places. Eight of these sites were ultimately selected for data recovery investigations. The archeological data represent 12,000 years of prehistory and history in what is now the Borough of Meyersdale and Summit Township in Somerset County, Pennsylvania.

Meyersdale is a rural farming community that has long recognized the importance of its history; however, the breadth of local prehistory and the value of archeology generally had not been widely understood. Although there was some initial community support, there was concern that the archeological investigations would delay road construction, thereby hampering economic growth. In contrast, some residents hoped the archeological investigations would prevent roadway construction and the possibility of further development. Many of these residents felt the roadway would bring prospects of large fast-food restaurant chains and other "outside" inter-

ests that would diminish the small town appeal of Meyersdale. Also of concern to local farmers, especially the Amish, were the effects of the archeology on their agricultural fields and crop yields. Therefore, ever-present during the course of the archeological study was the challenge of turning the controversial highway project into a positive experience for the community. The project team determined early on that educating the public about archeological goals, responsibilities, and the regulatory process would best serve the needs of all involved. In an effort to educate the public and bring the past alive for the community, a public outreach and education program was developed to create opportunities for the community and archeologists to interact and educate one another.

Together, the community, PennDOT, the Pennsylvania State Historic Preservation Office, and Greenhorne & O'Mara, Inc. developed a public outreach and education program. Initially, meetings were held with a high school history teacher, the town librarian, and members of the historical society to gain insight on issues and approaches that would resonate within the community. Their ideas were then incorporated into the program, which involved a variety of activities aimed at attracting a diverse audience. The program included

- lectures at elementary and high schools, historical societies, and the community library,
- presentations for special interest groups such as Boy Scout and 4-H troops,
- participation at local fairs and festivals,
- field and laboratory tours throughout the course of the project,
- community volunteers in the field and laboratory,
- an invitation by the Meyersdale High School to participate in the Social Studies Curriculum Committee,

- communication with, and education of, local collectors and avocational archeologists,
- newsprint media (over 20 articles) and television features chronicling the progress of the archeology,
- a children's booklet,
- two PBS films on the project archeology: a documentary, "Ghosts of the Mountains," aired nationally; and an instructional film produced for museum, school, and state agency educational programs.

Although the community reaction to archeology was initially mixed, the program established a mechanism for discourse and resulted in increased support for the project. Through education, participation, and developing relationships and lasting friendships, many residents have a new found sense of stewardship of archeological resources. For example, after a flood that devastated many homes and farms, residents expressed concern about damage to the sites. The "Flood of '96 Remembered"* highlighted public concern on the effects of the flood on the archeological sites.

The program also fostered a partnership between project archeologists and local collectors. This increased the archeological knowledge base and provided an opportunity to educate collectors about proper recording techniques and anthropological goals.

Through educational and social interaction, a lasting relationship based on trust and shared information developed between the community and project staff. This atmosphere enabled the community to participate in both the archeological and regulatory processes. The growing community interest is also evident in the revival of the Somerset County Chapter of the Society for Pennsylvania Archaeology, which now comprises many citizens involved in the Meyersdale project efforts.

The program was well received by the local community, the Pennsylvania State Historic Preservation Office, and the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation. Specifically, the Advisory Council for Historic Preservation included the Meyersdale project in its *Selected Section 106 Cases, 1986-1996*, and stated "The project promises to be a model for public education in archeology." The program has allowed archeologists, PennDOT representatives, and the community to interact and establish clear and open lines of communication. For example, during archeo-

logical lectures, residents had the opportunity to ask questions and initiate dialog with PennDOT officials. According to PennDOT, the program and the resulting cooperative atmosphere was a key point in turning a controversial project into a winning project supported by the community. The relationship developed with the public during the course of the project resulted in a win/win situation for all involved. The community has a new roadway, a better understanding of the past, and a greater appreciation and respect for archeological resources. With community support, PennDOT was able to bring in the project on time and under budget. The archeologists gain through the data gathered, and by creating an atmosphere of mutual respect between the client, community, and archeologists.

The Meyersdale project has demonstrated that increasing public awareness and participation garners support for roadway projects, as well as cultural resources programs. In addition, the increased visibility and cooperation between agencies and the public can catch the attention of local and state politicians who can listen to not only the cries for better roadways, but also cries for historic preservation. PennDOT District 9-0 has received widespread praise, including the 1997 Preservation Pennsylvania "Initiative Award for Community Involvement," and the 1999 "Project Recognition Award" for the most outstanding project in the state.

By sharing information about local history and prehistory with the community, great strides have been made in creating an atmosphere in which archeologists will be welcome to the area for future studies. Perhaps the greatest benefit to the public and the discipline of archeology, however, is that by establishing a close relationship with the community, and especially local teachers, the data can be taken into the classroom to educate students about the importance of archeology and historic preservation. As such, the development of public outreach and education programs as an integral part of the archeology process is the best way to assure a future that honors the past, but recognizes and respects the needs of living communities.

Note

* Flood of '96 Remembered (Meyersdale, Pennsylvania: *The New Republic Newspaper*, 1996).

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